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The Challenge of the Ecumenical Movement for the Orthodox Church

By

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THE CHALLENGE OF THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT FOR THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

It is generally agreed among Orthodox faithful that the participation of the Orthodox Catholic Church in the Ecumenical Movement gives her a further opportunity to make herself known to Western Christians from whom she had been isolated until modern times because of geographical and historical reasons. There can be no doubt that, as our Church appears officially in Ecumenical meetings, she is in a favorable position to state her claims as the authentic Church of Christ with the solemnity which the occasion provides and which very likely make the Protestants stand and take notice. On the other hand, however, our participation should make us aware of the challenge with which the Ecumenical Movement confronts the Orthodox Catholic Church. It does not suffice to have the assurance that we are indeed witnessing to the faith of the true Church. We must be prepared to recognize our human inadequacies as representatives of that faith and be ready to act in the direction of perfecting our witness in order to be more effective in drawing into the fold of the Orthodox Catholic Church those abiding in error and thus bring greater glory to Christ and His Holy Church.

The first inadequacy which I wish to consider is the lack of a matured theology suitable to meet the demands which our growing contacts with Protestants have placed upon us. Due to the Moslem subjugation and persecution of the Orthodox Catholic Church for four centuries (and certain sections of the Church are still suffering in Moslem lands), Orthodox theology could not rise to the challenge of spreading Protestant teachings upon the outbreak of the Reformation. A series of local councils were held in the seventeenth century with the purpose of defending Orthodox doctrine against Protestant innovations; but the pronouncements were hurriedly prepared and no theology was elaborated or developed on the controversial teachings.

Indeed, even since the liberation of the Orthodox lands (in the Balkans) and the establishment of theological schools (the middle of the nineteenth century), no theology of special note has been produced proportionate to the bulk of theological writings of Protestant divines.

The geographical separation of the Orthodox East and the Protestant West which continued after the liberation tended to keep Orthodox divines complacent as to the seriousness of Protestant theology. Since the time, however, when Orthodoxy has been joining Protestants in Ecumenical deliberations, it has been felt necessary for the Orthodox to examine more thoughtfully the faith of the Church in order to deduce more extensively the theological inferences logically inherent in it. We must go forward and elaborate the theology which is in seed form within the Church and thus continue the glorious tradition of the Holy Fathers who created the golden age with their monumental writings in which is combined depth of personal devotion and erudtion.

One good result of our participation in the Ecumenical Movement is the challenge with which we come face to face as regards the need of a more fully developed theology. It shakes us out of our theological complacency. In certain quarters of Orthodoxy the view has been voiced that the Orthodox should withdraw from the Ecumenical Movement since we are the *Una Sancta,* and consequently have no purpose in joining a search for Church unity with the Protestants. There is much to be said in support of such a stand on the grounds of consistency and mere logic. On the other hand, such an attitude may possibly betray a sort of timidity of the Orthodox to face the Protestant challenge, as well as the indolence of some Orthodox divines to proceed to an elaborate interpretation of the Orthodox faith on points where Protestantism has entered into error. Are we hiding behind such contentions in order to conceal our individual limitations?

Too many of us have been unduly cozy in our own Orthodox circles and prefer the comfort and security of isolation to exposure to the stimulation of non-Orthodox views. We would rather bury our heads in the sand and let the rest of the world go by. Perhaps some feel their inadequacy to cope with the theological elaborations of the Protestants, not necessarily because they are unaware of their own doctrinal

position, but because they are not competent enough to give a fuller delineation of what is held by the Church. In any event any kind of escapism is unbecoming to the Orthodox Catholic Church and casts discredit upon her. We fail miserably as modern representatives of a Church and Faith which has been handed down to us by generations of courageous and militant writers.

The Orthodox Catholic Church, especially in America, should muster her theological forces and consider more seriously the need for responding to the challenge of her Protestant surroundings. If Orthodoxy is truly here to stay as a permanent reality in the Western world, its leaders must have the foresight and vision to understand the necessity of singling out gifted men and training them as theologians and exponents of Orthodox thought. The Orthodox Catholic Church will regain the splendor she once possessed only by raising up men with the rare combination of qualities found in the Holy Fathers, personal commitment and erudition. She cannot rest contented on providing only parish priests and not plan systematically the preparation of qualified men for theological specialization.

The time has come for us to continue the tradition of the Holy Fathers by adding to their deposit of theological and philosophical thought. It is important to be like them, not by imitating the letter of their writings and merely quoting their texts, but by possessing their mentality and spirituality. This will be possible only when Orthodox theologians attain to a sacrificial capacity of surrendering their individualism and ego to the common consciousness of the Church, namely, by sacrificing their ego upon the altar of Truth. Orthodox theology is essentially mystical and thus does not depend on scholarship and academic pursuit, though these are valuable for an articulation of mystical experience. The soul of the theologian must be identified, as much as possible, to the soul of the Church; it must be attuned to the Holy Spirit. Complete participation of the theologian in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church secures his oneness with the common consciousness of the Church through which the Holy Spirit is witnessed.

If the Orthodox Catholic Church were ever to withdraw from the Ecumenical Movement on the grounds of her being the true Church,

as advocated in certain quarters, it would not mean that the only alternative would be complete indifference to Protestantism and to the Protestant quest for unity. It is the mission of the Church to lead into the sphere of truth those who are astray. But we cannot content ourselves with merely asserting the claims of the Church. No permanent good results from simply delivering official statements on the exclusive nature of the Orthodox Catholic Church. Protestants are not particularly impressed when we restrict ourselves to assertions that the Orthodox Catholic Church represents the *Una Sancta.* These claims must be backed by action and especially by a disposition to receive the Protestants into the pale of the historic Church.

Strange as it may appear, we are not quite anxious to have converts in the Church, although we are essentially inviting them when we make statements that the Orthodox Catholic Church is the one Church of Christ. When we declare in Ecumenical meetings that Orthodoxy is the one Church which Christ founded, preserving the faith pure and unadulterated since Pentecost, and that those outside her pale are deprived of the fulness of truth, yet eagerly longing for unity in Christ, it only stands to reason that we are in effect calling upon them to abandon their errors and find their way into the Orthodox Catholic Church where they will find unity and redemption.

We cannot make these claims and simultaneously be reluctant to accept converts into the Church. This is being both inconsistent and dishonest. It is our obligation to declare that the Orthodox Catholic Church is the one, true Church of Christ, but it is equally our duty not only to receive joyfully those who approach the threshold of the Church, but indeed prepare with eagerness to admit the maximum number of converts. The necessary disposition for receiving non-Orthodox who have assented to Orthodox claims is lacking in the Church. It is not exactly a convenience for us to have outsiders come in, since they require special attention. Systematic catechizing, baptism, and confirmation consume not a small portion of pastoral activity. Again we must turn to complacency to find the cause of our reluctance. It is more comfortable to be with those of Orthodox parentage and of the same national origin. Converts raise problems that require

thinking, planning, and oftentimes re-orientation, re-adjustment, and shift of emphasis.

Thus it is obvious that the sense of mission is lacking among Orthodox today. We are not prepared even in disposition to confront the problems that the entry of large numbers of converts would raise for us. Although we may not be in a position at the present to "accommodate" them in a Church largely consisting of immigrant and non-English speaking elements, there should at least be the willingness to take the necessary steps of planning and preparing to meet what must and will ultimately happen in the near future. The Church will one day open its doors to all who seek the truth. But at this stage it does not suffice to admit that we are not ready for converts, as is usually done. Along with this acknowledgment must go the determination to begin preparing immediately for the fulfillment of Orthodoxy's manifest destiny in the Western world. The decision must be made now to plan and put our household in order for the admission of converts.

Our participation in the Ecumenical Movement gives us a splendid occasion to stop and pass judgment on our own selves. Of course, the Church as the Body of Christ, is holy and unerring, but those who are members have need of constant self-examination and self-reproach. The sin of self-righteousness is common among us. The fact that we are in the true Church of Christ ought to lead us often into self-criticism and frequent self-judgment. Our responsibility in the sight of God is graver than that devolving upon non-Orthodox, because we tend to keep the light under the bushel, and thus bear far more guilt than those in the darkness of error. It would help to remember the warning of our Lord: "And that servant which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes. But he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes. For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required, and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more" (Lk. 12:47-49).

Thus we have not discharged our responsibility simply by deploring the chaotic disunity among the Protestants and safeguarding the purity of the Orthodox faith. We must not stop there. The Ecumenical

Movement should teach us the manifest destiny of Orthodoxy in the Western world. If we had eyes to see we would see that the time has come for Orthodoxy to come to the assistance of a divided Christendom and in turn to the aid of a war-torn world again threatened by international crisis aggravated by unprecedented scientific advance. To distort the mission of Orthodoxy and to misinterpret her purpose out of self-interest or indolence is to commit unforgivable blasphemy against Christ and the Church which is the abode of the Holy Spirit.

In spite of our closer relation with the Protestant Church occasioned by our very co-existence with its members in American society and particularly by the Ecumenical Movement, it is necessary to recognize that the response on the part of the Orthodox Catholic Church remains inadequate. We cannot make good our claims as the *una sancta* unless we are able to manifest *unitas*. If divisiveness is the most conspicuous evil plaguing and discrediting the Protestant version of Christianity, it is incumbent upon those of the Orthodox Catholic Church to avoid such policies or line of action that mitigate against the unity of Orthodoxy. It does not suffice to rest contented with the fact of the unity in faith within the pale of the Orthodox Catholic Church. This is not the fulness of Orthodox unity, for even schismatic churches may have this degree of unity with the main body of the catholic Church. Doctrinal unity must be inseparable from unity in Love which is the fruit of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Even unity in faith becomes precarious and threatened when fellowship or *koinonia* in the Holy Spirit is absent.

Consensus in the faith should be combined with communion in Love. Both are necessary fruits of the Holy Spirit. If the Orthodox Catholic Church is truly inhabited by the Holy Spirit, then both uniformity of belief and *koinonia* must equally become manifest; otherwise we are committing the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit. Although we have access to the fulness of the Holy Spirit by virtue of our being in the true Church of Christ, none the less by our sins of pride and individualism we quench the Spirit. There can be no greater offense against God.

Jurisdictional bounds which represent linguistic and ethnic differences can be transcended by Love in the Holy Spirit. The power of

koinonia, which we preach to our Protestant friends who lack it, can break down the barriers of such diversity. Although these outward differences that account for separate jurisdictions need not be forcibly eliminated, yet it must be admitted that they foster and shelter personal self-interest and other human weaknesses which enfeeble Orthodox unity. These must be overcome by placing the welfare of Orthodoxy over and above selfish concerns and ambitions.

No greater disservice can be rendered to the Church of Christ than to have Orthodox delegates make official appearances at inter-church gatherings without the necessary preparation which only unity and mutual understanding can effect. Without a united front we cast discredit on Orthodoxy and make our claims to unity look ridiculous. When Orthodox delegates become acquainted with each other for the first time just shortly before the opening of the inter-church conferences (as in Oberlin, September of 1957) it is plain folly to expect to represent the fulness and holiness of Orthodoxy worthily and effectively. No more convincing proof of our shortsightedness can be found than the fact that Orthodox delegates hardly recognize each other when they arrive at Ecumenical meetings. Nothing could be more humiliating and shameful for Orthodoxy. After attending two such conferences (Evanston and Oberlin), I cannot help but feel that we are not even profiting from the mistakes of the past. We persist in the intransigence that pride and lack of Love create. When shall we awaken from our lethargy and complacency?

It is urgent that we co-ordinate the theological efforts of the various jurisdictions in America by planning systematically on periodic Pan-Orthodox Theological Conferences in which our outstanding theologians will meet, first to become acquainted personally with each other in order to be known mutually at least by name, and secondly, to study thoroughly in the spirit of humility and Love the problems that the Ecumenical Movement has raised for Orthodox theology. We shall in essence be pooling all our theological resources and be able to produce the theological literature for which the circumstances of our time call. The faculties of our Orthodox seminaries in America, of course, will be involved in the pursuits of such Pan-Orthodox Theo-

logical Conferences. Once this has been accomplished, it will be a simple step to meet with the theological circles abroad.

No one single jurisdiction bears the responsibility for the lack of needed *koinonia.* The Greek-speaking Church, to begin with, often takes an independent attitude and is prone to consider itself as the whole Orthodox Catholic Church in America with the feeling that the other jurisdictions can just follow along the best they can. It has been the general practice to ignore somewhat the non-Greek speaking jurisdictions and to be too eager to find fault with whatever they do without expressing the least willingness to lend them what assistance we can in correcting what we may judge as faulty. I get the feeling that we delight in passing critical judgments on them and become guilty of self-righteousness and indifference to their needs. We do not make good our claims to distinction as the representative Church of the Ecumenical Patriarchate. If we truly are the Mother Church in Orthodoxy, and, as such, are entitled to a primacy of honor, then we must put aside our spirit of self-sufficiency and indifference and manifest the Love in Christ toward those of other jurisdictions, instead of pursuing our course independently as if they did not even exist. Deeds and not mere words can justify what claims are asserted.

The Greek-speaking Church must take the initiative which Love compels for the purpose of securing a united Orthodox witness in America. We must not hesitate in the face of the new concerns and possible difficulties such an endeavor would create. Snugness and comfort again are temptations which should be resisted, lest they dominate us and lead us into shirking our responsibilities. For example, it is more convenient for Greeks to be in the company of other Greeks whose language and general temperament we understand. The fact remains, however, that comfort and expediency can never be the guiding standards in a Church vigorous with life and Love.

One immediate result of our indifference has been to place the concept of Hellenism in an unfavorable light. Instead of promoting its cause and proving its essential connection with the Orthodox deposit, we have made non-Greek speaking Orthodox react against Hellenism, thus indirectly damaging the integrity of Orthodox thought.

In other words, we have failed in representing Hellenism worthily. It has often been misrepresented, turned into a narrow chauvinism, and its meaning as a way of life and thought has been utterly lost. This immoderate exclusiveness which is characteristic of Greek-speaking Orthodox has done violence to Hellenism; it has injured the cause of Hellenism with which Orthodoxy has been inseparable since the golden era of the Fathers and generally since the age of the Ecumenical Councils.

On the other hand, those of other jurisdictions have become unduly resentful of Greek exclusiveness in matters of general Orthodox concern, as well as intolerant of the policy of rigidly adhering to the Greek language, the liturgical as well as the spoken. They would like the process of anglicization to proceed among the Greeks as rapidly as it is in their own particular jurisdiction, thus revealing lack of understanding of the situation peculiar to the Greek-speaking jurisdiction. It is a matter of failing to transcend the human limitations of their fellow-Orthodox and not succeeding in grasping sufficiently the indissolubility of the bond between the Christian faith and Hellenism within the framework of Orthodox thought.

The invitation to be part of the Ecumenical Movement is an invitation to become cognizant of the new era opening for Orthodoxy. Whether we continue to share in this antinomical venture for Church unity or not, the fact remains that the hand of God has moved Orthodoxy into the Western world for a purpose to which we must be alive. The crisis plaguing the West is basically one arising from disunity and chaos in all spheres of human existence. The heterogeneous fabric of Western Society resulting from undisciplined and disorganized thinking stemming from the age of the so-called Enlightenment is revealing its intrinsic weakness in our times in increasingly tragic terms. It is spiritually bankrupt and Western Christianity has proved impotent to heal the spiritual infirmity which lies at the basis of the crisis of Western Society, simply because it is a Christianity suffering itself from disunity.

The message of Orthodoxy to a world torn by division and cultural disunity is one of unity, religious, intellectual, and cultural. The con-

tribution which the Orthodox Catholic Church can make to the Western world in terms of unity is of inestimable importance, providing those who have the privilege of abiding within her bosom believe this and labor to this end with the necessary dedication and enthusiasm. This makes it ever more imperative that unity be a conspicuous characteristic of Orthodoxy. By this is meant that unity in *koinonia* as well as in faith must be a realized fact, if Orthodoxy is to have any purpose for existing at all. Orthodoxy is the depository of the fulness of Truth, and unity, consequently, must be the unmistakable sign. We cannot possess the Truth to serve selfish interests. This is a contradiction in terms. The Truth which is Christ manifests itself in the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Love and unity, once made manifest within the Church, become a power that exerts influence upon the world to which it is exposed and to which it must minister by reason of its mission.

The question, therefore, that remains is not whether or not we should continue our present relationship with the Ecumenical Movement, as it is a matter of coming to the recognition of Orthodoxy's manifest destiny within a society enfeebled by religious disunity and cultural confusion. We must be cautious against the temptation of viewing Orthodoxy as simply one among the several Christian communions that found their way to the new world. It represents the Eastern section of Christendom which alone preserved an unbroken continuity with the faith and polity of the primitive Church. A further consideration must be noted: it is the only section of Christendom which became associated with the Roman Empire until its fall in 1453. Orthodoxy is not another fragment of divided Western Christendom. It is the total Christianity of the European Civilization which has direct origins in the Graeco-Roman Civilization which centered originally in Rome on the Tiber and subsequently in New Rome on the Bosporus. It is very much unlike Western Christianity, which, due to its separation from the authentic Christianity of the East, gave birth to an illegitimate civilization, known as Western Society, supposedly the only heir of Graeco-Roman Culture.

As Orthodoxy moves westward and continues to grow, we must remember that it bears the residuum of the authentic European Civilization which preserved its political framework until the fall of Constan-

tinople in 1453. The residuary cultural tradition latent in Orthodoxy could be a most valuable contribution to the culturally infirm civilization of the West. We cannot strip Orthodoxy of its cultural involvements without doing violence to its integrity and uniqueness. Too often we are inclined to try to make Orthodoxy more palatable by divesting it of its cultural associations which — some would have us believe — are not essential and permanent to the mission of the Orthodox Catholic Church.

It is not making the Orthodox Catholic Church conform to the types of Western Christianity that will secure her appeal and ultimate growth in America and generally in the Western world. Rather it is the blossoming of her intrinsic ethos kept pure and unadulterated that will insure her beneficial effect and prove her genius. Such fruition of the potential of Orthodoxy will become manifest in the unifying power generated by the Holy Spirit in all areas of human life, as we find attested to in the long history of the Byzantine Society of the Eastern Roman Empire. Arnold Toynbee reminds us of a truth which even we Orthodox have forgotten: that Western Society can not have claims to being the only culture of Europe and that the Orthodox Catholic Church represents more than a religion; she is the matrix of the Orthodox Christian Society which is a civilization distinct from that of the West and yet more legitimate as a European society. There is more to Orthodoxy than religion, strictly speaking. The sanctifying presence of the Holy Spirit does not only reconcile man with God (this is religion, properly speaking), but also hallows the totality of human thought and the social order, integrating all three areas of existence into a unified culture and maintaining the continuity of this synthesis in the course of history.

Present day Orthodoxy has lost its consciousness of being historically associated with the Byzantine Civilization. Indeed, too many of us are oblivious of the fact that it was within the framework of the Byzantine Empire that Christianity since the fourth century allied itself with Hellenism and the State to constitute one society, one world, one state, one Church, one faith, one philosophy. We must never lose sight of the truth that the Orthodox Catholic Church is the heir of the heritage of cultural unity and homogeneity, bearing within herself

the seeds of cultural blossoming valuable in bringing about universal harmony. She is bound up with the Orthodox Christian Society which, as Toynbee so aptly reminds us, is a civilization in itself distinct and separate from the civilization of the West. It is the cultural unity in the Orthodox heritage which we must not fail to make manifest to a world sick with religious and intellectual confusion.

There is no better way to be loyal to our heritage than to permit the Holy Spirit to operate among us and strengthen the unity among the local Churches within the pale of Orthodoxy. We can no longer depend upon state assistance. The framework of the state is missing and we are now on our own in working along with the Holy Spirit which inhabits the Church. This is perhaps an unprecedented instance of such a large number of Orthodox Churches within the bounds of one, single country existing independent of state support. Obviously the supreme test of Orthodoxy is now at hand.

Can such a large Church keep herself from breaking up into fragments as she finds herself in a country which is alien to her history and cultural association and which is a veritable field of religious and intellectual conflict? It is possible because the Church is Christ's and not man's; He is the Head of the Church and the Holy Spirit indwells therein. But we must remember that human sin can injure the unity of the Church. Schism is the gravest danger that the Orthodox Catholic Church is facing in America. We must constantly realize the growing threat of this peril. It should be noted in particular that "it is the jealousy of the episcopal office which is the mother of all schism," as Tertullian points out. He also states in this regard that "hostility to the Bishop's position begets schism." We need to remind ourselves of this fact since ambition for the episcopate has already caused schism within the Orthodox Catholic Church in America. Although the cases have not affected the greater body of the Church, we may yet profit by considering seriously the threats of schism. St. Optatus of the fifth century writes: "You cannot deny that schism is the supreme evil." Likewise St. Irenaeus teaches us that God "shall condemn those who give rise to schism, who are destitute of the Love of God, and who look to their own special advantage rather than to the unity of the Church; and who for trifling reasons, or any kind of

reason which occurs to them, cut in pieces and divide the great and glorious body of Christ. . . . Those who cleave asunder and divide the unity of the Church shall receive from God the same punishment as Jeroboam did."

These are only a few of the many warnings voiced by the Holy Fathers against those who give occasion to schism. Living in a country of clashing and competing religious and philosophical ideologies makes it the more incumbent upon us to heed the ever-present danger of schism. The forces of divisiveness are all around us in America; they surround the Church on all sides and continuously press against her. Vigilance is the more to be shown in preserving the unity of the Orthodox Catholic Church and the avoidance of whatever might threaten her unity. To rend asunder the seamless garment of Christ is a heinous sin which incurs divine judgment.

Consequently, our hitherto relationship with the Ecumenical Movement should show us not only how lamentable the disunity of Protestantism is, but still more important the many hazards to which the unity of the Orthodox Catholic Church is exposed; indeed at times her unity appears very precarious. There is an urgency in the need for more consolidation in the life of Orthodoxy, because only a more unified witness can do full justice to the message of the Orthodox Catholic Church and show forth her inherent powers.

Her exposure to Protestantism, which will be permanent, must make us acknowledge the need of checking the existing inadequacies as regards sufficient theological development, co-ordination of the efforts among the several jurisdictions, and Love in the *koinonia* of the Holy Spirit. Increasing adjustment to American society should mean increasing awareness of the perils lurking in the environment and progressive preparation in coping with them, instead of "accommodation." Only self-examination and self-judgment can lead to a militant spirit of vigilance and preparedness against the forces of disunity which can be engendered within the Church by the combination of spiritual mediocrity and a self-seeking mentality. Leadership especially must be free of these shortcomings if the Orthodox Catholic Church in America is to pursue the course ordained by her Divine Founder with the fulness of unity in *koinonia,* as well as in faith.

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THE REV. EUSEBIUS A. STEPHANOU

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